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Jan. 9, 2006

VDH 06-03

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH OFFERS TIPS TO HELP INFANTS THRIVE

(RICHMOND, Va.)—By now the New Year's baby probably has had a nap, a change of warm clothes and a filling meal. These and other basic infant care practices help newborns thrive and grow into healthy, active children. The Virginia Department of Health's (VDH) Office of Family Health Services offers the following tips to put newborns on the road to good health and keep them safe during their first year.

SAFE SLEEPING

A safe sleep environment is a must. During 1998 and 1999, the last period for which data are available, 16 infants died in Virginia as a result of unsafe family and child sleeping arrangements, according to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. Here's how you can help your child sleep safely.

- Always put infants on their backs (face up) when they are resting, napping or sleeping.
- Place infants on their tummies only when they are awake and supervised.
- Dress your baby in a sleeper or pajamas appropriate for the room's temperature instead of covering them with a blanket.
- Make sure the mattress fits snugly into the crib's frame. If you do not have a crib, place your infant on a firm sleep surface such as a bassinet or cradle and never on a sofa, pillow or waterbed.
- Never let your infant sleep or nap with pillows, stuffed toys, bumper pads, comforters or quilts.

FEEDING BABY

When newborns are not sleeping they usually are eating. Breast milk or iron-fortified formula provide all the nutrients needed for the first four to six months of life. Breastfeeding decreases the incidence and severity of diarrhea and lowers the risk of respiratory infections, allergic diseases, childhood asthma, leukemia and tooth decay. It also protects against obesity later in life. Breastfeeding mothers experience a lower risk of ovarian and breast cancers and greater weight loss. They also show less postpartum anxiety and depression than do formula-feeding mothers.

Generally, babies are ready for solid food at about 4 to 6 months or when they can sit up with support, and hold their head and neck steady. Check your child's developmental progress with your pediatrician before introducing solid food.

- Start with one tablespoon of rice cereal and enough breast milk or formula to make it thin and soupy.
- Feed your child with a spoon and never put cereal in a bottle. When your child is able to eat cereal well, you can add other foods such as strained fruits and vegetables.
- Add new foods five to seven days apart and watch for possible allergic reactions.
- Introduce whole cow's milk at age 1. It is necessary for brain growth and development.

(more)

BABY'S FIRST TOOTH

Children typically get their first tooth around 6 months of age and don't lose all their baby teeth until they are 11 or 12 years old. Baby teeth save space for permanent teeth and aid in chewing and in speech and facial bone development. Here's how to promote good oral hygiene for your baby.

- Offer a bottle only at mealtime and only with breast milk, formula or water.
- Do not put your child to sleep with a bottle containing anything but water. Beverages that linger on the teeth increase the risk of tooth decay.
- At 6 to 10 months of age children can start drinking from cups. This is a good time to wean them from the bottle with the goal of eliminating it completely by their first birthday.
- Continued bottle use after a year increases the risk of tooth decay.
- Limit your child's consumption of sugary beverages such as soda. Offer diluted fruit juice instead, but no more than one cup a day.
- After your baby's first tooth comes in, brush it twice a day with water.
- Avoid spreading decay-causing germs. Don't share spoons with your infant, and don't clean a bottle nipple or test the temperature of the bottle with your mouth.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Daily physical activity is vital for good infant health. Avoid confining babies to strollers and car seats for extended periods, which may delay development of their motor skills. Be sure that infants are in safe settings that facilitate physical activity and do not restrict movement for long periods. Provide infants with activities that help them explore their environment. Play games such as peek-a-boo and patty cake with your baby whenever possible.

NEW PARENT TOOL KIT

The New Parent Tool Kit helps parents care for themselves and their children during baby's first years. It contains useful information for expectant, new or repeat parents on the care, safety and development of children. It offers information on postpartum depression and includes tips for new fathers. The kit also includes a convenient place to organize and store your baby's health records. New parents usually receive the kit at the hospital or through a local community group. For more information on the kit call (800) CHILDREN ((800) 244-5373).

Helping parents and communities lay the foundation for a lifetime of good health during infancy is a prime objective of the VDH Office of Family Health Services. Its 50 preventive health programs touch Virginians across the span of their lifetime. Central to its efforts is the concept that a healthy lifestyle is not a luxury, it's a lifesaver. For more information visit www.vdh.virginia.gov and click on "Healthy Living."

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